



Firefighters set a backfire before dawn at the deadly Esperanza Fire in the San Jacinto Mountains on Friday in Banning, California, west of Palm Springs. Four US Forest Service firefighters were killed and a fifth critically injured when a wall of flame swept over them as they tried to protect a home.

Rice steps up pressure for Hezbollah disarmament

AP, Beirut

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stepped up international pressure on Hezbollah to disarm, saying the guerrilla group must surrender its weapons if it wants to remain part of Lebanon's political process.

Rice, in an interview with the privately owned Lebanese Broadcasting Corp. aired Friday, urged Hezbollah to lay down its arms according to the Aug. 14 ceasefire that ended its 34-day war with Israel, and choose between being a militant group and a legitimate political organisation.

Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran and Syria, has refused to disarm despite heavy international pressure to surrender its weapons. The group holds 11 seats in the Lebanese parliament and two spots in the Cabinet.

"If Hezbollah wants to be in politics... Hezbollah should be disarmed. You cannot have one foot in terror and the use of violence and the other foot in politics. It just doesn't work that way," Rice said.

"Hezbollah has to decide whether it's going to maintain its terrorist wing and remain a terrorist organization or whether it's going to ... be part of the political process," she added.

The interview was taped at Rice's office in Washington and conducted by May Chidiac, a Lebanese journalist who lost an arm and a leg in a car bombing in Lebanon in September 2005.

The US government has labeled Hezbollah a terrorist organization and blames it for the deaths of 241 US Marines in the bombing of their Beirut barracks in 1983, as well as for two attacks on the US Embassy in Beirut and the 1985 TWA hijacking that killed an American serviceman on board. Hezbollah repeatedly has denied such accusations and says it now opposes terrorism.

Rice also urged the Lebanese government to end what it called Hezbollah's "state within a state" and prevent weapons from reaching the militant group.

"I'm counting on Lebanon to live up to its obligations, and I'm counting on Lebanon to want to evolve to a normal state," Rice told the satellite channel. "And a normal state has an army and police that answer to the state, not to a state within a state." The UN ceasefire resolution that ended the Hezbollah-Israel war called for the Lebanese army to deploy alongside international peacekeepers in Hezbollah strongholds across south Lebanon. Some 16,000 Lebanese troops have fanned out across the region, including along the border with Israel, for the first time in decades.

Rice warned that as Lebanon tries to rebuild, some people might try to destabilize its Western-backed government.

"We've heard that there are people who would like to intimidate or assassinate again," she said, referring to the 2005 assassinations of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and other anti-Syrian politicians. She did not elaborate.

Asked if Syria was trying to destabilize Lebanon following its withdrawal last year, Rice said: "It's not any great secret that there are concerns about what Syria, which once occupied the country, might try and do through continuing contacts in the country. But I don't want to accuse any one place. I just want to make very clear that the international community believes there should be no foreign intimidation of the Lebanese people."

98 US soldiers killed in Iraq this month

AP, Baghdad

The US military said Saturday that a Marine had been killed in restive Anbar province, raising to 98 the number of American forces killed in Iraq during October, the fourth deadliest month since the war began in March 2003.

The Marine, assigned to Regimental Combat Team 5, died Friday from "wounds sustained due to enemy action," in the western province, the military said in a statement.

The name of the Marine is withheld pending notification of the family.

There have been only three months in which more US forces died in Iraq: 107 in January 2005; at least 135 in April 2004, and 137 in November 2004.

At least 2,811 members of the US military now have died since the beginning of the Iraq war in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count. The figure includes seven military civilians. At least 2,254 died as a result of hostile action, according to the military's numbers.

UN urges Solana to pressure Israel on Lebanon overflights

AFP, Beirut

Unifil commander General Alain Pellegrini Saturday urged EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana to pressure Israel to end its controversial overflights of Lebanon, a UN official said.

The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (Unifil) has previously complained that the continued overflights are harming its mission in Lebanon.

The issue was raised by Pellegrini during a 40 minute meeting with Solana, on the second leg of a four-nation Middle East trip, at Unifil headquarters in Beirut, the official said.

"(Pellegrini) complained about the overflights," Unifil spokesman Daljeet Bagga told reporters. "He asked Solana to pressure the Israelis."

Militant infiltration up in Afghanistan since Pak deal, says Nato

Nato apologises for Afghan civilian deaths

AFP, Bagram Air Base

The movement of militants from Pakistan into Afghanistan has increased since Islamabad signed a deal with tribal elders along the border last month, Nato's top military commander said Saturday.

The Nato-led International Security Assistance Force was monitoring the situation after the agreement with pro-Taliban elders in Pakistan's North Waziristan area, General James Jones told reporters.

"Preliminary indications are that the movements across the border have increased since the signing of agreements on the other side of the border," he said at the end of a three-day visit to Afghanistan.

Isaf was however still evaluating the situation and the first indications may not be conclusive, he said.

"We are watching it very closely," he said.

Nato is building a new relationship with Pakistan as part of efforts to address the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, which was a regional problem, he said.

Isaf commanders were due to meet with the Pakistan military in the coming weeks, he said, with the Nato-led force wanting to remove militant sanctuaries in the region and stop the crossborder movement of fighters.

Afghan officials have long alleged that the Taliban -- which was in government from 1996 to 2001 -- are finding support across the border, with militants sent into carry out attacks.

Pakistan says it is doing what it can to stop infiltration with 80,000 troops stationed on the border.

As part of the deal in North Waziristan, locals said they would stop infiltration as the military scaled down its presence in the area. But analysts in Afghanistan expressed scepticism about the pledge.

Meanwhile, Nato's military commander General James Jones apologised yesterday for civilian casualties in anti-Taliban strikes as an investigation continued into claims that scores died this week.

Jones blamed insurgents for the killing of civilians in southern Kandahar province, saying they had been using ordinary people as cover to avoid International Security Assistance Force fire.

Typically, "insurgents do not play by the same rules that we would like to play by," Jones told reporters at the end of a three-day trip to Afghanistan during which he met President Hamid Karzai and military leaders.

"In this particular case, sadly there appears to have been loss of life and innocent people who were wounded in a legitimate mission where insurgents were using the cover of the civilian population to make it very difficult for us to get at them."

Audit faults Halliburton unit for shielding Iraq contract data

AFP, Washington

A Halliburton subsidiary has sought to prevent public disclosure of even routine reports about a contract to supply the US embassy in Iraq by inappropriately labelling them proprietary information, a government audit found Friday.

The audit by special inspector general for Iraqi reconstruction projects, Stuart Bowen, said the practice by Kellogg Brown and Root Services Inc. was "an abuse" of federal procurement regulations.

"KBR is not protecting its own data, but is in many instances inappropriately restricting the government's use of information that KBR is required to gather for the government," he said in a report.

Halliburton and its KBR subsidiary have been the target of numerous contracting controversies since it was awarded a no-bid 2.4 billion dollar contract to supply the US military on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Past disputes have had political impact because Vice President Dick Cheney headed the oil services contract before he ran as George W. Bush's running mate in the 2000 elections.

The audit looked only at a KBR task order to provide fuel and food for the US embassy in Iraq.

But the auditor said KBR's "inappropriate use of protective data markings ... could be a systemic problem occurring throughout the Army's LOGCAP contract."

It found that KBR was labelling almost all reports required under the contract as proprietary data for official use only and not releasable to the public.

Pak nuclear scientist Khan in new health scare

REUTERS, Islamabad

Disgraced Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan is suffering from deep vein thrombosis, and his condition has deteriorated in the past few days, his wife told Reuters on Saturday.

Khan, 70, was placed under house arrest in early 2004 after admitting to selling nuclear secrets and materials to Iran, North Korea and Libya, and has been recovering from surgery for prostate cancer in early September.

"His condition has deteriorated from what it was compared to a few days ago," his wife, Henny Khan, said.

She said her husband had been diagnosed as suffering from deep vein thrombosis, a blood clot, usually in a vein in the lower leg that can prove lethal.

"He is being treated and we have to see how it goes," she said.



An Afghan refugee shows his registration card at a registration centre in Peshawar yesterday. Pakistan began to register Afghan refugees for the first time and to provide them with official identification during their temporary stay in the country.

Mexico sends federal troops to Oaxaca

US journalist killed in violence

AFP, Mexico City

Mexico's President Vicente Fox ordered federal troops into the southern city of Oaxaca yesterday after a US cameraman for independent media website Indymedia and two Mexicans were shot dead.

Cameraman Brad Will was killed Friday in the state capital Oaxaca city by a bullet to the chest, said Florentino Lopez, spokesperson of the Popular Assembly of Oaxaca Villages (APPO).

Teacher Emilio Alonso was fatally shot three times in San Bartolo Coyotepec, 15 kilometers (10 miles) from Oaxaca City, while waiting for the governor of the state to arrive, his wife told local radio Universitaria.

Late Friday, authorities also announced the death of Esteban Zurita Lopez, who was caught in the crossfire.

At least 11 people were injured by gunshots in the violence, including Mexican photographer Oswaldo Ramirez of Milenio magazine, who was shot in the leg, according to Lopez.

The shooting erupted around barricades erected by protesters, who have been fighting for pay raises for striking teachers and have demanded the resignation of the governor, Ulises Ruiz.

The shooting came in the fifth month of a strike by some 70,000 Oaxaca teachers for higher pay.

The government had hoped to settle the problem in negotiations before the inauguration of president-elect Felipe Calderon December 1.

Main access routes to the state capital, with a population of about 600,000, were blocked by barricades erected by the protesters.

AP, Richmond

With designs on the White House, Republican Sen George Allen hoped all along his 2006 Virginia re-election campaign would draw national attention.

But what he probably didn't have in mind was a stumble-marred race that is so close his party recently felt obliged to pay for \$1.4 million in television ads to safeguard a seat long thought safe.

Allen's attempt to hold off Democratic challenger Jim Webb is one of four races that strategists in both parties say will likely settle the overall battle for Senate control. In a reflection of the stakes, the two parties will spend more than \$20 million combined on television in the campaign's final two weeks in Tennessee, Missouri, New Jersey and Virginia, a lineup that could not have been forecast even a few weeks ago.

"A year ago the focus was on the

more traditionally competitive states like Pennsylvania and Ohio," Sen. Chuck Schumer of New York, head of the Democratic campaign effort, said recently, referring to two races where Democrats appear likeliest to defeat Republican incumbents.

"It is a tougher (election) cycle for Republicans," agreed Sen. Elizabeth Dole of North Carolina, head of the GOP campaign arm.

Democrats must gain six seats to win control, and have strong leads in Rhode Island and Montana as well as Pennsylvania and Ohio.

Strategists in both parties calculated long ago that Missouri's race would be close, with state auditor Claire McCaskill challenging first-term Sen. Jim Talent. With a statewide initiative on the ballot, it's also been clear for months that the issue of embryonic stem cell research would figure prominently. Talent opposes the expansion of federally funded efforts in a field that scien-

tists say holds promise for the treatment of many diseases.

Controversy flared after McCaskill's campaign aired a television commercial in which actor Michael J. Fox, who has Parkinson's disease, exhibited the uncontrollable shaking that is symptomatic of the illness.

"They say all politics is local, but it's not always the case. What you do in Missouri matters to millions of Americans. Americans like me," Fox says in the ad.

Tennessee seemed an unlikely place for a pivotal race, but GOP strategists say Democratic Rep. Harold Ford Jr., hoping to become the first black elected to the Senate from the South since Reconstruction, has proven to be an excellent candidate.

Palestinians differ over end to hostage crisis

REUTERS, Gaza

One of the three Palestinian factions holding an Israeli soldier in the Gaza Strip said yesterday it expected a solution to the crisis within days, but Hamas and a Palestinian Authority official were less optimistic.

It was the first time since Corporal Gilad Shalit was captured in a cross-border raid in June that any of the factions has said that his release in exchange for Palestinian prisoners could happen soon.

The Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) said in a statement that the three groups had agreed to a proposal by Egyptian mediators, though it said a deal still depended on Israel. Israeli officials made no immediate comment.

"The dawn of freedom to the prisoners is about to rise and we expect a solution to our prisoners in few days," said a PRC spokesman, Abu Mujahed. "We confirm to you that there is a definite move in the issue of the captured soldier."

A political leader of the governing Hamas Islamist group, Osama al-Muzaini, was less optimistic, saying: "Real progress has been made over the issue of Shalit but that progress did not get to the point where we can say a swap was imminent."

The armed wing of Hamas was also among the groups that captured Shalit.

Palestinian Chief Negotiator Saeb Erekat said it was premature to think the crisis would soon be resolved.

"I don't think we're closer today to solving Shalit's problem than we were yesterday," Erekat told reporters in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Hamas and its allies have demanded the release of up to 1,400 Palestinians, including minors and women, held by Israel in exchange for Shalit. Israel has said Hamas must first release Shalit and then it will consider any prisoner release.

The PRC on Saturday said the Egyptian proposal would include the release of Palestinians held by Israel. The group did not give any details.

Last week, Israel's infrastructure minister, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, held talks in Cairo and afterwards expressed approval of a framework deal that Egypt had put forward, but he did not give details.

Chad accuses Sudan of bombing villages

AFP, N'djamena

Chad yesterday accused neighbouring Sudan of bombing four villages close to its border with the Sudanese region of Darfur, although humanitarian groups expressed doubt about the claim.

"The Sudanese air force targeted the Chadian villages of Bahai, Tine, Karyari and Bamina, destroying the homes of peaceful Chadian citizens," Communications Minister Hourmadji Moussa Doumgor said in a statement.

He gave no details of any casualties.

But a humanitarian organisation source in the capital N'Djamena told AFP that "Our teams present on the ground cannot at the moment confirm the bombings announced by the... minister."

"Our colleagues in the region saw nothing, this news seems to me rather surprising," said another non-governmental organisation source.

"We are not in Tine but we have a team in Bahai, I am rather surprised."

The Chadian government has accused Sudan of aiding rebels who are seeking to overthrow President

Idriss Deby Itno, and who resumed hostilities last Sunday with an attack on a Chadian town near the borders with Sudan and the Central African Republic.

Sudan meanwhile accuses Chad of providing refuge to rebels from Darfur, which runs along the border.

Also on Saturday a Chadian rebel leader claimed the fighting early in the week killed almost 80 people, with government forces accounting for 73 of the dead.

"We also took 43 prisoners and destroyed and seized numerous vehicles," said General Mahamat Nouri, head of the Union of Forces for Democracy and Development (UFD), in a telephone interview with AFP.

For its part the Chadian government said the fighting in the towns of Am Timan and Goz Beida left around 40 people dead, of whom 30 were rebels.

The Chadian army reclaimed control over the region without incident Wednesday, with rebel forces retreating to far eastern Chad. Sudan denied any involvement in those attacks.



A Congolese man walks past a UN position held by Tunisian soldiers yesterday in Kinshasa. On the eve of the second round vote the UN has taken up fortified positions around the city centre.

PHOTO: AFP